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A Case Study on the Semantic Homogeneity of the English Verb in the Light of Functional Sentence Perspective

1. Introduction

The Firbasian theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) seems to have vindicated its firm place in the area of theories of information structure. Following late Firbasian tradition, the author's research into the area of the theory of functional sentence perspective has predominantly dealt with the text material of religious discourse (see Adam 2004; 2008; 2009). Nonetheless, the present paper draws on the results obtained in the research carried out in the field of FSP operating in fiction narrative texts, namely in one of the stories by Stephen Leacock, "How to live to be 200", from the collection titled *Literary Lapses* (Leacock 1971).[1] It looks at the text material from the perspective of Firbasian tradition, following approaches and usage of terms of Firbas (1992). It focuses especially on the issue of the non-thematic tracks, with special regard to the function of the English verb and the phenomenon of semantic homogeneity.

2. Functional sentence perspective

Combining the approaches adopted both by formalists and functionalists, the theory of functional sentence perspective draws on the findings presented by the scholars of the Prague Circle. The founder of FSP himself — Jan Firbas — drew on the

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[1] The present paper draws on the preliminary results provided by a common research project carried out jointly by the author and his MA students, especially Zuzana Wachsmuthová (Wachsmuthová 2009). It is a revised and amended version of a shorter text published in a limited circulation edition of Adam (2010).

findings of his predecessor, Vilém Mathesius. As early as in 1911, Mathesius noticed the language universal of every utterance having a theme (topic) and a rheme (focus/comment), and formulated the basic principles of what was to be labelled FSP only later.[2]

In Firbas's view, sentence is the field of semantic and syntactic relations that in its turn provides a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD); Firbas defines a degree of CD as "the extent to which the element contributes towards the development of the communication" (Firbas 1964: 270). The most prominent part of information is the high point of the message, i.e. the most dynamic element; other elements of the sentence are less dynamic (have a lower degree of CD). The degrees of CD are determined by the interplay of FSP factors involved in the distribution of degrees of CD: linear modification, context and semantic structure (Firbas 1992: 14–16). In spoken language, the interplay of these factors is joined by intonation, i.e. the prosodic factor.

It is the continuum of the degrees of CD along with the interplay of the basic FSP factors that make FSP specific within the field of text linguistics. One is able to analyse and interpret a clause making use of exactly given criteria. CD operates on the level of a clause; the individual thematic and non-thematic elements — when viewed form the level of a macro-structure — form then thematic and non-thematic strings. In other words, the theory of FSP transcends the domain of text grammar, enriching it with the approach adopted by the study of information processing. Research has shown that an FSP analysis of a distributional macrofield (a paragraph, a chapter) is a promising step taken in the study of FSP and that it can reveal significant characteristic features of the whole text (Firbas 1995; Adam 2004: 17–18; 2009).

2.1. FSP and the dynamic semantic tracks

Within a macrofield, having ascribed the dynamic semantic functions (DSFs) performed by the elements of the sentence, and having constituted thus one of the basic scales (Quality or Presentation one), one can establish the thematic, the transitional and the rhematic layers of the text. They are formed by all thematic, transitional and rhematic elements of the text, respectively. In other words, the rhematic track of a text, for example, may be described as a complete set of all the rhematic elements found in the given passage. It must be added that since the rhematic sphere

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[2] The true pioneer in the study of word order (and so information structure) was a French classical scholar Henri Weil, who distinguished between "the movement of ideas" and "the syntactical movement" (Weil 1844). Weil's contemporary, Hungarian polymath Sámuel Brassai, was the first to notice word order differences between Hungarian and Indo-European languages and to reveal that word order in Hungarian sentences is based on a division between a topic and a comment (Brassai 1860). Similarly, developing his ideas in an identical direction, a German general linguist and sinologist Georg von der Gabelentz (1891) dealt with the distinction between a so-called "psychological subject" and "psychological object."

is the most dynamic section of every piece of text (Rh-elements carry the highest degrees of CD), it is usually the rhematic track that is central to the functional analysis of a text. Also the thematic and even transitional tracks are, however, capable of chaining into separate dynamic semantic tracks.

2.2. The English verb and FSP

With regard to the general tendency of English towards nominal expression in predication, it has been largely taken for granted that — from the point of view of dynamic semantics (FSP) — the verb in English is usually semantically weak; it has relatively emptied meaning and serves as a mediator between the subject and other sentence elements. For instance Vachek claims that "in English the old Indo-European function of the verb, i.e. that of denoting some action has been most perceptibly weakened" (Vachek 1995: 23). Apart from that, being a part of an analytical language, "the English finite verb form appears to be much less dynamic in character … and frequently ceases to be the unmatched instrument of predication, being often reduced to something that very closely resembles a copula" (Vachek 1976: 342). Vachek directly relates this fact to the overall tendency of English towards nominal expression in predication. Renský (1966), being in harmony with Mathesius and Vachek, ascribes the shift of the semantic centre from the verbal towards nominal expression in Modern English to the decrease in the communicative value of the verb (cf. Vachek 1995: 23–24). It follows that "the nominal tendency is brought into particular prominence if the structure of the Modern English sentence is confronted with that found in Modern Czech" (Vachek 1976: 338; cf. Mathesius 1975; Trnka 1928: 138–144; Dušková et al. 1988: 409–420).

From the point of view of static semantics, verbs represent the main organizing elements in the formation of the sentence (it is well known that they shape the sentence in that they play a decisive role in determining participant roles). It may be argued that this formative function of verbs in the static semantic structuration of the sentence runs counter to their (prototypical) transitional status (in terms of the degrees of communicative dynamism as placed on them). This discrepancy between static semantics and dynamic semantics is, however, only imaginary. It can be reconciled by appealing to the fact that the formative function of the verb subsumes the verb's mediating (transitional) role (meant here in terms of static semantics) — in other words, that the verb plays a mediating role both in the dynamic semantic structuration of the sentence and in its static semantic structuration (for details, see Adam and Kudrnáčová 2010).

In relation to this phenomenon, it will be useful to refer the reader to Firbas's treatment of the verb within his theory of FSP. In the context of FSP, the English verb tends to be the mediator (or transition) between the theme and the rheme (see also section 2.3). Under the circumstances, the verb either ascribes a quality to the subject, bridging its specification, or presents something new on the scene if it

expresses the existence or appearance on the scene with "explicitness or sufficient implicitness" (Firbas 1995: 65; cf. Adam 2009: 92–94); usually, these are verbs such as "come," "appear," "occur," "be," etc.

2.3. The transition

In accordance with the distribution of the degrees of CD, each sentence constituent corresponds to one communicative unit. Units carrying a lower degree of CD form the thematic part of the sentence and those carrying a higher degree of CD form — together with so-called transition — the non-thematic part of the sentence. As the paper is concerned with the transition, only the transitional layer will be commented on below.

The transitional layer consists of the transition proper (TrPr) and the most dynamic transitional element, transition (Tr). The transitional sphere as a whole adds to the information set by the thematic elements and, at the same time, forms a real transition to the rhematic section. Typically, the transitional layer is made up of the predicative verb. The transitional layer is formed by so-called Temporal Modal Exponents (TMEs) of the verb: categorial exponents and notional components (Firbas 1992: 70–71).

The TrPr layer is constituted by the categorial exponents (i.e. formal realization) of the verb (tense, mood, aspect, person, number and polarity), while the categorial exponents are signalled, for example, by auxiliaries, endings or suffixes. The categorial exponents of the verbs have a three-fold linking role in the sentence: first, they link the subject with the predicate (syntactic level), second, they link the Th and Rh (FSP), and third, they link the content of the sentence with the extra-linguistic reality.

The Tr layer is, in turn, made up of the notional component (lexical meaning) of the verb — the semantic content or, rarely, by the nominal part of the predicate. It performs the dynamic semantic function of Quality or Presentation. Interestingly, as long as the notional component of the verb is irretrievable from the immediately relevant context, it carries a higher degree of CD than the categorial exponents do. Under favourable conditions (when there is no successful competitor in terms of CD), the notional component of the verb abandons the transitional layer to complete the message as the most dynamic element of the distributional field (Firbas 1992).

If Specification is not present in the Quality Scale, the rheme proper element performs a DSF of Quality (and the verbal, usually copula-like element performs the DSF of Ascription of Quality (AofQ).

2.4. Semantic homogeneity

Semantic (or notional) homogeneity is typically present in every thematic and rhematic layer; however, the degree of homogeneity displayed differs, depending on how

the text is perspectived and how the author allows the layers to assert themselves. Individual members of a track usually have a common notional denominator, i.e. are semantically associated (Adam 2004; cf. Firbas 1999; Svoboda 2006). In connection with transitional verbs operating in Presentation Scale sentences, for instance, Firbas speaks of "semantic affinity;" it seems that via such affinity the verbs not only semantically support the character of their subjects, but also "prepare the way" for the phenomena to be presented (Firbas 1992: 37–38, 61).

Generally speaking, it is usually the rhematic layer that shows a high degree of semantic homogeneity. Thus, it perspectives the flow of communication to the most prominent element of the layer — it is usually the closing member of the dynamic-semantic string that conveys the information towards which the development of communication is directed. The remaining rhematic elements move the development of communication a little further, always preparing the way for the final member; from this point of view, the rhematic layer represents the most dynamic part of the text — mediating the high point of the message, it fulfils the narrator's communicative purpose. A simple enumeration of the members of the rhematic layer "tells the story": it summarises the most important events, introducing the participants and describing their basic action (Firbas 1995; Adam 2009). The tendency towards semantic homogeneity suggests that the text is written effectively — the author was able to convey the message to the reader, and, having done so, fulfilled his communicative intention.

Typically, the semantic homogeneity is reflected in FSP analysis and text interpretation of the rhematic tracks; the present paper will exemplify its occurrence in the transitional track. The semantically unified character of the transition will be discussed from the point of view of several aspects of the text under analysis (see the following section).

3. FSP analysis of the sample text

As has been mentioned, a fraction of Stephen Leacock's short story "How to live to be 200" (Leacock 1971) will be analysed in the framework of FSP. Due to space limitations, for a detailed account on the content of the chart below and the abbreviations used, the reader is referred to Firbas (1992) and Adam (2009). Below is the text in full, with individual communicative fields numbered in parentheses; the FSP analysis proper presented in Table 1 follows:

> (30) Jiggins is dead. (31) He was, of course, a pioneer, (32) but the fact that he dumb-belled himself to death at an early age does not prevent a whole generation of young men from following in his path. (33) They are ridden by the Health Mania. (34) They make themselves a nuisance. (35) They get up at impossible hours. (36) They go out in silly little suits (37) and run Marathon heats before breakfast. (38) They chase around barefoot to get the dew on their feet. (39) They hunt for ozone. (40) They bother about pepsin. (41) They won't eat meat because it has too much nitrogen. (42) They won't eat fruit because it hasn't any. (43) They prefer

albumen and starch and nitrogen to huckleberry pie and doughnuts. (44) They won't drink water out of a tap. (45) They won't eat sardines out of a can. (46) They won't use oysters out of a pail. (47) They won't drink milk out of a glass. (48) They are afraid of alcohol in any shape. (49) Yes, sir, afraid. (50) "Cowards." (51) And after all their fuss they presently incur some simple old-fashioned illness (52) and die like anybody else. (53) Now people of this sort have no chance to attain any great age. (54) They are on the wrong track. (55) Listen. (56) Do you want to live to be really old, (57) to enjoy a grand, green, exuberant, boastful old age (58) and to make yourself a nuisance to your whole neighbourhood with your reminiscences?

Table 1. FSP Analysis of the sample text

Clause	TrPr (conj.)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (AofQ/Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
30		Jiggins1		is2	dead3			Q
31		He1	of course3	was2		a pioneer4		Q
32	but1		the fact that he dumb-belled himself to death at an early age2	does not prevent3		[not] a whole generation of young men4 from following in his path5		Q
33			They1	are ridden2		by the Health Mania3		Q
34		They1 themselves3		make2		a nuisance4		Q
35		They1		get up2		at impossible hours3		Q
36		They1		go out2		in silly little suits3		Q
37	and1	^		run2		Marathon heats3 before breakfast4		Q
38		They1		chase around2		barefoot3 to get the dew on their feet4		Q
39		They1		hunt for2		ozone3		Q
40		They1		bother about2		pepsin3		Q
41		They1		won't eat2		[not] meat3 because it has too much nitrogen4		Q
42		They1		won't eat2		[not] fruit3 because it hasn't any4		Q

Clause	TrPr (conj.)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (AofQ/Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
43		They1		prefer2		albumen and starch and nitro-gen3 to huckleberry pie and doughnuts4		Q
44		They1		won't drink2		[not] water out of a tap3		Q
45		They1		won't eat2		[not] sardines out of a can3		Q
46		They1		won't use2		[not] oysters out of a pail3		Q
47		They1		won't drink2		[not] milk out of a glass3		Q
48		They1		are2		afraid of alcohol in any shape3		Q
49			sir2			Yes1 afraid3		Q
50						"Cowards"1		
51	And1	they3	after all their fuss2 presently4	incur5		some simple old-fashioned illness6		Q
52	and1	^		die2		like anybody else3		Q
53	Now1	people of this sort2		have3		no chance4 to attain any great age5		Q
54		They1		are2		on the wrong track3		Q
55					Lis-ten10			Q
56			you2	Do1 want3		to live 4 to be really old5		Q
57		^		^		to enjoy a grand, green, exuberant, boastful old age1		Q
58	and1	^ your-self3		^		to make a nui-sance2 to your whole neighbourhood4 with your remi-niscences5		Q

In the comments to follow, all three basic dynamic semantic layers (Th — Tr — Rh) will be discussed; the introductory notes are concerned with a somewhat general view of the FSP analysis. First of all, all the sentences implement the Quality scale and are thus perspectived away from the subject. Their distributional fields manifest an objective word order with the gradual rise in the degree of CD, and the actual linear arrangement corresponds with the interpretative one. As a result, the object, which generally tends to act as the rheme, is shifted to the left and occupies the thematic sphere.

The high point of the message is mostly conveyed by elements placed at the end of the sentences, and is realised by objects, adverbials (of manner, place, time) and complements. They are context-independent since they are not retrievable from the immediately relevant context. They carry the highest degree of CD. All the context-independent sentence constituents are recorded in column 7, functioning as the Sp and the FSp and acting as the RhPr and the Rh. As far as this text fraction is concerned, there are no such verbal examples of being successful competitors of other sentence constituents capable of completing the development of communication. In short, it is primarily column 7 that covers the rhematic layer. The only exception may be observed in the very first sentence of the text (31); it displays the function of AofQ. This function is fulfilled by the verb "is" and the function of Quality is performed by the subject complement "dead", which is, as a matter of fact, a part of the rhematic layer.

As the remaining verbs are recorded in column 5, they function as the Q-elements acting as the TrPr or the Tr. Since English verbs typically function as a mere preparatory or transitory step that enables the reader to be prepared for the most prominent portion of information, one would say it is a stereotypical column where no more comments are needed and expected. In spite of that, further discussion on certain exceptions will be provided when dealing with individual layers.

To finalize the basic functional picture of the text, at least a few words should be added on the thematic layer. The elements carrying the lowest degree of CD that are, to a great extent, expressed by context-dependent subjects, function as the Quality Bearer, and serve as the DTh and ThPr.

3.1. The rhematic track

What follows is a description of the Tr- and Rh-dynamic semantic tracks, respectively, deriving from the FSP analysis presented in Table 1. In brief, the rhematic dynamic semantic track displays the following chain of elements:

> Dead → a pioneer → [not] a whole generation of young men from following in his path → by the Health Mania → a nuisance → at impossible hours → in silly little suits → Marathon heats → before breakfast → barefoot → to get the dew on their feet → ozone → pepsin → [not] meat → because it has too much nitrogen → [not] fruit → because it hasn't any → albumen

and starch and nitrogen → to huckleberry pie and doughnuts → [not] water out of a tap → [not] sardines out of a can → [not] oysters out of a pail → [not] milk out of a glass → afraid of alcohol in any shape → yes afraid →"cowards" → some simple old-fashioned illness → like anybody else → no chance → to attain any great age → on the wrong track → Listen → to live → to be really old → to enjoy a grand, green, exuberant, boastful old age → to make a nuisance → to your whole neighbourhood → with your reminiscences

A mere enumeration of the rhematic elements is capable of depicting the highlights of the text and, as it were, tells the story: the reader learns that Jiggins does not live any more, however, there appear other people on the scene that stand for him, concerning his peculiar habit. They are besotted with the same follies and no one can discourage them from doing so. They are overly careful about their diet and environment and as a consequence they are not immune enough to the outside world, which they might pay dearly for.

Attention should also be paid to the following semantically homogeneous Rh-elements: pepsin, nitrogen, ozone, albumen and starch and nitrogen, huckleberry pie and doughnuts, water, sardines, etc. The point is that all those represent substances, whether related to food or purely chemical. This saturated, aesthetically marked set is undoubtedly an organic part of the author's communicative strategy. A similar phenomenon may be observed in the subsequent phrases that create certain syntactic patterns:

[not] water out of a tap → [not] sardines out of a can → [not] oysters out of a pail → [not] milk out of a glass → afraid of alcohol in any shape

The individual clusters as if followed a syntactic-rhythmical chant, which clearly adds to the above-mentioned aesthetic effect of the passage.

3.2. The transitional track

While the rhematic layer is usually associated with a more or less semantically related tracks, remarkably enough, one may observe a certain kind of dynamism within the transitional layer as well. It is especially the gradation effect described e.g. in Firbas (Firbas 1995: 67–70) and Adam (Adam 2009: 40–46) that deserves attention. As was noted above, the essential role of the transition is to create a formal boundary between the two remaining spheres. The transitional character of the track is not capable of completing the development of communication; nevertheless, in case of the passage under discussion the transitional track shows a gradation of the act expressed by the graded meaning of the individual verbal elements. This phenomenon is noticeable especially in the set of clauses 36 to 40:

get up (36) → go out (37) → run (38) → chase around (39) → hunt for (40)

First, the basic movement of raising one's body is referred to, and then a more extensive motion even accompanied by a direction is adopted. Next, an increase in speed takes place that grows in its effect in order to catch something. The final

climax is gradually reached by each verbal element when approaching the end. Every syntactic element pushes the communication, as it were, a step further.

To some extent, an analogous gradation effect takes place also in the subsequent part of the track, affecting the set of clauses 42 to 53:

> bother about (41) → won't eat (42) → won't eat (43) → prefer (44) → won't drink (45) → won't eat (46) → won't use (47) → won't drink (48) → are (49) → incur (52) → die (53)

It opens with a continual refusal of food and drinks that can end in no other way but passing away. In any case, a certain culmination is evident here as well. The point is that the transitional elements constitute a gradual rise in overall semantic tension, and, as a result, form a distinctive gradation effect. Let me conclude this observation by saying that an analogous gradation patterns operating within the non-thematic spheres were traced also in other passages, usually of narrative but also poetic character (see Adam 2009). The semantic tension described above may be viewed as a poetic means of emotive flavour. Research has indicated that such artistic input is a vital part of the author's communicative intention as well as the reader's impression (cf. Svoboda 2006; Hurtová 2009).

Finally, there is one more unusual aspect related to verbal elements that commonly do not fulfil any communicatively significant function unless they exceed other clause elements in a degree of CD. The second half of the text is utterly filled with negative particles. Leacock does not use any other particle but "not." In Firbas's understanding, the particle "not" performs the anticipatory role of the RhPr; he labels that as negative focus anticipator (Firbas 1992: 62–63). Even though the negative particles and the element acting as the RhPr do not occur closely next to each other, the negation is perspectived towards the most prominent element within the clause. The negative particle represents an inseparable component of the RhPr. On that account, the particles have been added to the rhematic sphere in square brackets, because without the negation the expressions would carry a completely different meaning.

4. Conclusions

The paper offers a discussion on the role of the verb played within Firbasian theory of FSP and its potential power to contribute to the development of communication. Even though the English verb — being prototypically a part of the transition — represents a bridge towards the most dynamic, i.e. rhematic elements in the sentence, and is semantically rather weakened, it appears to be capable of conveying a significant degree of communicative dynamism. The FSP analysis of the sample text revealed certain semantic processes that foreground the role of the verb, marking it with a special aesthetic function (gradation effect, semantic homogeneity). Thus, transitional verbs seem to be able to reflect the author's communicative strategy and thus fulfil his communicative purpose.

On top of that, the poetic flavour — quintessentially associated with the rheme — has also been detected in the transitional layer of the text. The phenomenon of semantic homogeneity has been discussed predominantly in relation to narrative discourse, especially in terms of the process of establishment and development of the thematic and rhematic layers (Firbas 1995; Adam 2004; 2009). Firbas's far-reaching observations made in his paper on the dynamic semantic layers of text (Firbas 1995) as well as recent research (Svoboda 2006; Adam 2009; Hurtová 2009) have indicated that the writer's communicative purpose is typically related to the aesthetic function carried by the text and determines the writer's communicative strategies. As such, the author's intention may be corroborated by the dynamic, enhanced role of the transitional verb. The dynamic nature of dynamic semantic tracks thus allows the writer to implement specific communicative purposes.

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